

**Cave Board Meeting Minutes
February 22, 2014
Melrose Caverns Lodge
6639 North Valley Pike
Harrisonburg, Virginia 22802**

Virginia Cave Board (VCB) Members Present

Michele Baird
Daniel Doctor
Robert Denton, Jr.,
John Graves
John Haynes
Rick Lambert
Steve Lindeman
Marian McConnell
Meredith Weberg

Virginia Cave Board Members Absent

Janet Tinkham
Ruth Blankenship

Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) Staff Present

Chris Hobson
Roger Kirchen
Larry Smith
Wil Orndorff

Guests

Bill Biggers
Keith Christenson
Conner Christenson
David Ek
Zach Grandle
John Holsinger
David Hubbard
Tom Lera
Zenah Orndorff
Bob Thren
Carol Tiderman

Chairman Weberg called the meeting to order at 2:05 p.m.

Introduction of New Members

A new Cave Board member, Janet Tinkham, was introduced in absentia. Ms. Tinkham participated in the joint committee working group, but had to leave for a work obligation.

Announcements

Ms. Weberg expressed her thanks on behalf of the entire Cave Board to the owners of Melrose Caverns for hosting the meeting at their lodge, and for permitting a visit to the cave after the meeting. She also announced a prospect for starting a Cave Board in Tennessee.

Approval of Past Meeting Minutes

Minutes from our November 9, 2013, meeting had been shared with the Board. Mr. Lindeman moved to accept the minutes, Mr. Graves seconded the motion. The minutes were approved by the Board.

Treasurer's Report

Mr. Smith reported that \$1,680 is the current balance in the Cave Board account. This sum was given from Cave Conservancy of the Virginias to cover the costs of distributing the *Virginia Cave Owners' Newsletter*.

Karst Program Update

Mr. Orndorff reported on White Nose Syndrome (WNS) situation.

Every odd numbered winter, DCR and Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) staff conduct an endangered species bat count to assess the effects of WNS. This year, other species are being counted that are affected by WNS. Mortality of Tri-colored bats (formerly known as Eastern pipistrelle) has been very high, where their occurrence has been associated with Little Brown bats. Tri-colored bats are likely to be proposed for listing as endangered species. The results of the recent surveys indicate that the percent reduction in populations of Tri-colored bats at specific sites is highly variable. In most cases, numbers of Tri-colored bats have decreased, but not at the 95% level observed for Little Brown bats; reductions have been more like 50 to 75%, but variable by site.

A discovery was made of a small colony of ~200 Little Brown bats in a small, isolated cave. Mr. Haynes asked if the colony has resistance to WNS. Mr. Orndorff replied that WNS is present at the locality, but mortality rates were not as high as has been seen in other areas. In summary, there is some good news in the finding of this population of Little Brown bats, and that Tri-colored bats have been variably affected by WNS across the state.

Mr. Orndorff reported on dye tracing in The Cedars area in Lee County. Dye traces were conducted from the Golf Course Caves to the Flannery Bridge Spring, documenting the connection, and showed the *Lirceus* isopod populations at each locality could be similar. Ellen Koertge, an intern with the DCR, did a dye trace to show the connection. A comprehensive inventory of all karst features in The Cedars is sought by DCR. However, this is difficult due to the roughness of the terrain.

Mr. Orndorff participated in Level II Training for cave rescue in Texas in early February 2014.

Land Conservation Update

Mr. Smith relayed that newly elected Governor McAuliffe has set a new goal for land conservation in Virginia, and asked Board members to think about new areas as candidates for purchasing. Funding for land acquisition is exhausted at the moment, but more funding is expected to be available in the future (within the next one to two years). Mr. Smith asked for suggestions from the Board of large land tracts that may be available for purchase that have caves, as well as those that may provide opportunities for biologic inventory and/or study. Currently, 3 of 61 nature preserves are designated for protection of cave systems: Ogdens Cave, The Cedars, and Clover Hollow. Mr. Smith mentioned an additional acquisition of land in The Cedars is a priority for DCR and The Nature Conservancy (TNC).

Mr. Lindeman reported that Thompson Cedar Cave, the type locality of the Lee County Isopod, has potential for acquisition, as well as another unnamed property in The Cedars. TNC and its project partners will be seeking federal grant funding to assist with the cost of purchasing this property. The permanent protection of these properties will further the federal recovery goals for the endangered Lee County cave isopod. It will likely take some time for the negotiation to occur, however there are willing land owners of all of the properties.

Updates on Board Appointments

One newly appointed Cave Board member has joined the Board, Ms. Janet Tinkham. The maximum number of members (11) are currently on the Board; however, three terms expire in June.

OLD BUSINESS

Virginia Cave Owners' Newsletter (VCON):

Ms. Weberg showed a finished draft of the *Virginia Cave Owners' Newsletter* at the meeting. Funds exist for one last issue to be mailed. Notice is given in the newsletter that it will be the last mailed issue. Ms. Weberg will send it to DCR to have it mailed.

Postcards have been sent previously to cave owners asking for contact information and email addresses, but this solicitation produced a poor response. Mr. Graves advised that The National Cave Association went to a digital newsletter, and more attention was paid to the newsletters. Mr. Lera suggested adding announcements in local grotto newsletters. Ms. McConnell mentioned Facebook or other social media options for outreach. Mr. Kirchen suggested broadening the audience of the newsletter in general for greater outreach, perhaps changing the name to the “*Virginia Cave Board Newsletter*”. Mr. Smith mentioned that all VCONs are available as PDFs on the Cave Board page on the DCR website. Mr. Smith mentioned that DCR Natural Heritage program has a Facebook page, and could arrange to add Cave Board information to the DCR page. We discussed creating a Cave Board Facebook page, which Ms. Weberg was willing to do.

Virginia Cave Week 2014

The dates for Cave Week this year are April 20–26. Ms. Weberg mentioned the theme is “On ‘Hollowed’ Ground,” and a song written by Ms. McConnell will provide a theme song for the week. Ms. Baird asked for suggestions of lesson plans to promote cave week in schools. She mentioned a potential topic might be caves as historical sites, including discussing famous persons who have left signatures in caves. More publicity among science teachers is sought. The Front Royal Grotto is hosting a karst festival from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday, April 26, with tours, bat crafts, and other educational activities. Any Board members are welcome to help the grotto. Mr. Orndorff is going to conduct a program on caves and karst in the New River Valley in Giles County, with a stop in the Clover Hollow Natural Area; this will occur two or three weekday evenings during Cave Week.

Other Old Business

None

NEW BUSINESS

Mr. Smith mentioned the status of the sale of Natural Bridge. The Valley Conservation Council was approached to see if Natural Bridge could become a publically owned park. An intermediate private buyer has purchased the bridge through a low-interest loan. DCR staff performed an inventory of the natural heritage resources of the property including the caves found here and other karst resources. Value to the Commonwealth was demonstrated, the loan was approved, and the transaction took place on February 6. The sale was to the Virginia Conservation Legacy Fund. A conservation easement was placed on 188 acres, including the Natural Bridge and surrounding area. The hotel and other developments will remain in private hands. Natural Bridge Caverns is expected to be managed by the new owner. Income from the cave operation will

enable paying off the loan. The cave is significant biologically. The current owners are receptive to cave management. Bob Thren commented that the Natural Bridge was due to open for tours this very day.

Mr. Orndorff brought additional Cave Protection Act signs to be posted in caves, as the need is recognized. Mr. Denton mentioned that a new sign is needed at Panther Cove cave.

Mr. Zach Grandle spoke about Plains Mill Spring, and gave a brief presentation on the history of the spring and the mill. Water rights to the spring remained with the mill as the property changed hands over the years. The Town of Broadway is looking for new sources of water, and Plains Mill Spring is a potential source that the Town is investigating. Mr. Grandle asked about the potential to cause damage to the underground karst environment due to the installation of large pumping wells near to the spring source. Mr. Orndorff said deleterious effects are possible, but that the burden of proof is very high. Mr. Grandle indicated he would be interested in information on establishing a groundwater management zone. As there is currently no known conservation issues associated with Plains Mill Spring, the matter of establishing a Groundwater Management Area could be initiated by a petition to the State Water Control Board, per section § 62.1-257 of the Code of Virginia.

Mr. Smith mentioned two new articles in the journal *Banisteria* on the history of biospeleology in Virginia, and a survey of invertebrate cave fauna in Virginia. Several authors of the articles were in attendance and were recognized, including Mr. Hobson, Dr. Holsinger, Mr. Hubbard, and Mr. Orndorff.

Ms. Weberg announced that the Mid-Atlantic Region of the National Speleological Society is having a meeting in May with emphasis on cave conservancies, and invited Cave Board members to attend.

Dr. Doctor announced that a draft version of the Virginia Cave and Karst Trail website is available for review by Board members, and requested feedback in the coming weeks to have the website go live before or during Cave Week in April.

The meeting concluded with a brief ceremony honoring Dr. John Holsinger, who was awarded a plaque for his role in helping to found the Virginia Cave Board, and for his distinguished and lengthy service to the Cave Board throughout his career.

Next Meeting

Saturday, June 28. Place TBD, possibly in Roanoke or Salem

The meeting was adjourned at 3:44 p.m.